

## XVI. The Order of Melchizedek

May 1/2/3, 2018

Hebrews 7:11-19

**Aim:** To recognize the superiority of Christ's priesthood, which accomplishes what the old covenant priesthood never could – provide a better hope through immediate access to God.

*Schreiner:* In 7:1-10 the author argues that Melchizedek's priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood, and he continues along the same lines in 7:11-19. Verses 11-19 set forth the inadequacy of the Levitical priesthood. If perfection were realized through the Levitical priesthood, a new priesthood, a Melchizedekian priesthood, would not have been promised. The promise of a new priesthood demonstrates the inferiority of the old.

*Phillips:* In the discussion of Christ's superior priesthood, the new covenant involves the replacement of the old covenant priesthood—that is, the priesthood of Aaron and the tribe of Levi—with the new priesthood of Christ. By comparing these two we not only see how this change of priesthood effected a new administration of salvation, but we also come into a deeper understanding of what Christ has done and now is doing, and thus what it means to be a Christian living under the new covenant. We will look at three things in this study: first, we will note that with Christ's coming there are a new priesthood and a new law; second, we will observe how and why the new covenant offers a better hope than that offered in the Old; and third, from the difference between the old covenant and the new, we will draw some conclusions about what it means for us to live under this new covenant brought into history by the saving work of Jesus Christ.

*Hughes:* Helpfully, the text breaks into two parts, with verses 11-14 explaining the *insufficiency* of the Aaronic priesthood and verses 15-19 the *sufficiency* of Melchizedek's priesthood. Both sections are based on the author's brilliant and original understanding of Psalm 110:4 'The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,"', which the author saw as a solemn decree of appointment spoken by God to God the Son that would establish Him as our eternal priest.

*MacArthur:* The key phrase of this passage is 'we draw near to God' (v. 19b). God's ultimate desire for men is for them to come to Him. His ultimate desire for believers is that they continue to draw nearer to Him. God's goal in all that He does in behalf of men is that they might come into His presence. Drawing near to God is the essence of Christianity. Drawing near to God is the Christian's highest experience, and should be his highest purpose. This is the design of God for Christianity—access to His presence, coming into His presence with nothing between.

### A. The Inferiority of the Levitical Priesthood (Hebrews 7:11-14)

#### 1. The Tribe of Levi (7:11-12)

##### a) Change in Priesthood (7:11)

<sup>11</sup>Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?

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### (1) Perfection

*Hughes:* To begin with, the author argues that the old priesthood was insufficient and was replaced because it could not bring people to perfection. Often in Scripture the word ‘perfection’ has the meaning of ‘maturity’ or ‘completeness.’ But actually the meaning here is more specialized and means ‘to put someone in the position in which he can come, or stand, before God’—*access* to God. This is also the meaning of ‘perfect’ in verse 19. It is also the meaning in two other Hebrews texts—10:1, 14. So again, ‘perfection’ here in verse 11 refers to *access to God and a right relationship to Him*.

*MacArthur:* In Scripture, the word *perfect* is often used in the sense of maturity or completion, of being what something or someone is meant to be. Sometimes it means full-grown. Paul often uses it in this way. In Hebrews, however, it is used to refer to the goal and aim of Christianity. This goal, this maturity is access to God. In this sense it does not mean spiritual maturity (being advanced in the faith) but salvation in Christ (coming to faith). Verse 11 speaks of ‘perfection’ not coming through the ‘Levitical priesthood.’ The purpose of the priesthood was to reconcile men to God through sacrificing for their sins. But this priesthood could only picture, only typify, the actual reconciliation, because it could only typify cleansing of sin. It was therefore imperfect, in that it could not give men access to God. In Hebrews, perfection first of all means access to God, not the spiritual maturity of Christians (cp. 10:14). In other words, a person is perfected when, by Christ’s sacrifice, he is given full access to Christ. The Levitical priesthood could not provide this full access. Had the old sacrifices been able to bring a person into God’s presence, they would have ceased. They would have fulfilled their purpose.

*Schreiner:* The author begins by drawing an inference, ‘then,’ from the preceding verses. Since Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and Levi, which was evident from his blessing of Abraham and receiving tithes from him and from his perpetual priesthood, and since a priest like Melchizedek is prophesied (Ps. 110:4), perfection will clearly not be achieved through the Levitical priesthood. The word ‘perfection’ (*τελείωσις, teleiōsis*) refers here to eschatological perfection. In Hebrews, the concept of perfection is broad, including the forgiveness of sins, ethical righteousness, and the rule human beings were to exercise over the universe as priest-kings. If eschatological perfection could not be realized under the Levitical priesthood, there would be no need to designate the arrival of another priesthood, a Melchizedekian one. Another priesthood would be superfluous if the Levitical priesthood could bring about the new creation and bring human beings to the heavenly city. So it is clear that the Levitical priesthood is inadequate: it doesn’t truly and finally forgive sins and provide access to God. It doesn’t transform human beings so they become righteous. It doesn’t restore the rule human beings lost when they sinned.

*Phillips:* Why is there a new administration or way of salvation? The author argues that since Christ is a new kind of priest, He represents a new law or covenant administration. The word translated as ‘perfection’ (*teleiōsis*) could equally be rendered as ‘completion.’ It is used here to refer to salvation, for perfection or completion is the condition in which people are made acceptable to God. The point is that the need for a new priesthood indicates that the old priesthood could not itself accomplish the salvation to which it pointed. The very fact that there was another priesthood testifies that the old priesthood was imperfect and transitory.

*Bruce:* If God had intended the Aaronic priesthood to inaugurate the age of perfection, the time when men and women would enjoy unimpeded access to Him, why should He have conferred on the Messiah a priestly dignity of His own—different from Aaron’s and by implication superior to

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Aaron's? In fact, as is argued below in manifold detail, the Aaronic priesthood was neither designed nor competent to inaugurate the age of fulfillment; that age must be marked by the rise of another priest, whose priesthood was of a different order and character from Aaron's.

*MacArthur*: The point of 7:11 is made clear. If the Levitical priesthood could have brought this perfection—which is access to God, or salvation—why would God have provided another priesthood? This truth was extremely important for Jews to hear. It was important for believing Jews as assurance that they were now totally secure in Jesus Christ, that their break with Judaism and its rituals and repeated sacrifices was justified. They no longer needed a picture of salvation, for they had the reality of the Savior.

### (2) Law

*Phillips*: This argument assumes that the Levitical priesthood and the Old Testament law as an administration of salvation were inseparably linked. This linkage is made clear in verse 11, which says of the Levitical priesthood that 'under it the people received the law.' The priesthood, with its sacrifices, was the means under the old covenant by which sinful people were reconciled to God; the law served as an agent of their priestly ministry. The Old Testament priests pointed forward to Christ's death on the cross for the salvation of sinners; His death brought an end to their function and thus to the law as a way of salvation. The writer makes three points to establish this teaching.

*Hughes*: Failure to grant access to God is precisely what the old covenant Law and priesthood could not provide. The Law, of course, was not useless. After all, it came from God and was mediated by angels (cp. 2:2), and it provided important services. In reality, the Law was an excellent institution. The real problem was that man was sinful (cp. Rom. 8:3, 7). The Law had profound limitations. It could not atone for sin. The Levitical sacrifices covered over sin, but they did not remove it (cp. 10:4, 11). The Law could not impart spiritual life (Gal. 3:21) and could not help the conscience (9:9). As to the crucial matter of access, F. F. Bruce says, 'The whole apparatus of worship associated with sacrifice and ritual and priesthood was calculated rather to keep men at a distance from God than to bring them near.' Clearly, the old covenant had profound limitations as to making *atonement*, imparting *life*, clearing the *conscience*, and providing *access*.

*Schreiner*: Two other comments should be added here. First, the author says the law and the Levitical priesthood are entwined together. The law here is clearly the law of Moses, the law given to Israel at Sinai. The writer probably has in mind the fundamental character of the priesthood relative to the Mosaic law. In other words, apart from the sacrifices offered, there would be no forgiveness of sins under the old covenant. Hence the priesthood was essential for the law and Israel's covenant with Yahweh.

### (3) Priesthood

*Schreiner*: Second, the priesthood in view here is the one made with Aaron. When the author refers to the Levitical priesthood, he thinks particularly of the unique role given to Aaron and his sons as priests to offer sacrifices to atone for Israel's sins. Levites had other priestly duties as well in the OT, but the focus is on the sacrifices offered by Aaronic priests to procure atonement.

*Phillips*: The first point is that all of this did not happen without advance warning. It was precisely this change of priesthood that David foretold when he wrote of the Messiah, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek' (Ps. 110:4). David lived under the old covenant,

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under the law and the Levitical priesthood, but even then—through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—he announced a new order of priest that would come in the future. It was in the Messiah, he wrote, that God promised this new kind of priest. Therefore, long before the coming of Christ, the old order was recognized as transitional, temporary, and insufficient.

*MacArthur:* God never intended for the Levitical priesthood to remain forever and nowhere in Scripture is this idea taught. The Old Testament, in fact, anticipate (as in Ps. 110:4) that another priesthood was coming. If God predicted another priesthood was coming, it would have been reasonable to assume, even without further revelation, that the new one would be better and would replace the old. Israel was told that a greater priesthood was to come, of which the Messiah would be the Priest. If the Aaronic priesthood had been perfect, another would have been unnecessary. It was no accident or mistake that God set aside the Israelite priesthood. He had planned it that way from the beginning.

### (4) Audience

*Bruce:* The words ‘Now if perfection were attainable through the Levitical priesthood’ have a bearing on the class of readers at whom our author’s argument was aimed. If they were Gentile converts, in danger of abandoning their Christian faith, their only response to these words would have been: ‘We never thought there *was* perfection through the Levitical priesthood’—they certainly never thought so in their pagan days and they would have received no encouragement to think so in their Christian days. But if they were Jews by birth, now in danger of giving up the distinctive features of their Christian confession and merging once more in their former Jewish environment, the situation was quite different. Before their conversion they had envisaged no priesthood beyond the Levitical priesthood; even if they looked for a new priest to arise in the age to come, he was still a Levitical priest. Their Christian teachers would have encouraged them to think of the Levitical priesthood as something belong to the age of preparation, which had now given way to the age of fulfillment; but they were in danger of concluding that, after all, the old order (including the Levitical priesthood and everything else that went with it) had still much to be said in its favor. To such people our author’s assurance that the supersession of the Levitical priesthood by another had been decreed by God long before would have had practical relevance.

### b) *Change in Law (7:12)*

<sup>12</sup>*For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.*

*MacArthur:* ‘Change’ (*metatithēmi*) means to put one thing in the place of another. Christianity, in a sense, comes from Judaism. But Christianity is not merely enhanced Judaism; it replaces Judaism. The new priesthood, after the order of Melchizedek, was not added to Aaron’s, but replaced it. Aaron’s priesthood now has no validity at all. It is defunct, totally abrogated. Because the Aaronic priesthood and the Mosaic law were so closely tied to one another, a changed (replaced) priesthood also meant a changed law. God’s moral law, reflected not only in the Ten Commandments but throughout the Old Testament, is part of His very nature, and therefore cannot possibly change. Far from setting aside His moral law in the New Covenant, He has *strengthened* it as far as standards for His people are concerned (cp. Acts 17:30-31). Rather, the ceremonial law, the Aaronic system of sacrifices, *has* been set aside. The whole Judaistic system was changed—not just changed, but exchanged—for a new order, a new Priest, a new sacrifice, an entirely New Covenant.

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*Schreiner:* The indissoluble relationship between the priesthood and the law is explained. Since the law and the priesthood are bound together, a change in one means a change in the other. Now it is clear from verse 11 that eschatological perfection is not achieved through the Aaronic priesthood. Hence the Aaronic priesthood is *passé*. But if the priesthood has changed, then the Mosaic law is no longer in force either. Hence there is no basis for saying that Hebrews limits what he says about the law to priesthood and sacrificial instructions. The law and the priesthood are entwined together, and thus the passing of the priesthood also means that the law as a whole is no longer in force.

*Hughes:* The thrust of verse 11 becomes crystal-clear. If the Aaronic priesthood could have brought *perfection*—that is, access or nearness to God—it would not have been replaced by a new order and a new priest, Melchizedek! In fact, both the priesthood and the Law have been replaced because they are inseparable. Christ, our Melchizedekian priest, tells us that He did not destroy the Law but fulfilled it (Mt. 5:17). He lived out its every requirement. And now in place of the old external principle, He brings a new internal principle. Because of this we have perfection—access.

*Phillips:* Second, the coming of a new priesthood signals the arrival of a new way of salvation. By the term ‘law’ in verse 12, he does not mean the Ten Commandments—that is, the moral law of God. God’s moral law never changes, because He does not change and the moral law reflects His character (cp. Mt. 5:17). The writer of Hebrews has another meaning here, namely, the Mosaic law as an administration of the covenant of grace—that is, as a system of salvation. This is what he means when he writes, ‘For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.’ A new order of priesthood and a new kind of priest usher in a new administration of salvation, a new law.

*Bruce:* Nor is it only the Aaronic priesthood which must be superseded. That priesthood was instituted under the Mosaic law, and was so integral to it that a change in the priesthood carries with it inevitably a change in the law. If the Aaronic priesthood was instituted for a temporary purpose, to be brought to an end when the age of fulfillment dawned, the same must be true of the law under which that priesthood was introduced. So by his own independent line of argument our author reaches the same conclusion as Paul: the law was a temporary provision, ‘our custodian until Christ came’ (Gal. 3:24). If we like, we may say that Paul has the moral law mainly in mind, whereas the author of Hebrews is concerned more with the ceremonial law—although the distinction between the moral and ceremonial law is one drawn by Christian theologians, not by those who accepted the whole law as the will of God, nor yet by the New Testament writers. But in principle Paul and our author are agreed that the law was a temporary dispensation of God, valid only until Christ came to inaugurate the age of perfection. Its supersession is here seen to be implied in the acclamation of Messiah as a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

### 2. The Tribe of Judah (7:13-14)

<sup>13</sup>*For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar.* <sup>14</sup>*For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.*

*Schreiner:* The author confirms in v. 13 that a new priesthood has been established. Jesus is the great high priest, but He does not belong to the tribe of Levi. In the OT the priesthood is given specifically and exclusively to the tribe of Levi, and more specifically the high priesthood is

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restricted to Aaron and his sons (cp. Ex. 28:1, 3-4, 41; 29:9, 30, 44; 30:30; 31:10; 40:13-15). There is no precedent or permission from God for other tribes to bring offerings. Jesus is a priest, but He is a priest from another order and sphere.

*Schreiner:* The author restates and amplifies verse 13. In verse 13 Jesus is said to be from another tribe, and in verse 14 the tribe is specified: it is clear that Jesus descended from the tribe of Judah. Verse 13 noted that the tribe from which Jesus came never officiated at the altar. Verse 14 restates the same idea by indicating that a priestly ministry was not ascribed to Judah in the law. Verses 13-14 confirm that a new priesthood has arisen since Jesus is a priest from another tribe. Jesus' priesthood is not in accord with the law and its prescriptions, since He hails from the tribe of Judah. The reference to Judah brings to mind the kingly nature of Jesus' priesthood. He is a Davidic priest-king, a Messianic priest-king.

*Hughes:* The profound inadequacy of the old priesthood was further emphasized by the fact that the new had nothing to do with the old Aaronic priesthood. It was no small thing to suggest, let alone categorically state, that a priest could come from any other tribe than Levi. King Uzziah had played the fool when in a moment of vanity, he attempted to usurp the Levitical role, and he was confronted by the priests for it (2 Chr. 26:18). While Uzziah was raging at the priest, leprosy broke out on his forehead, and he remained a leper until his death! So the insistence that Jesus, from the tribe of Judah, was a priest was shocking to the Hebrew ear.

*Hughes:* So we see that Jesus was purposely distance from the old, inadequate priesthood. In fact, the phrase 'descended from Judah' was meant to indicate that the new Melchizedekian priest was a messianic figure. The word 'descended' is literally 'has arisen,' a term that has messianic significance in Scripture (cp. Mal. 4:2; Num. 24:17; 2 Pe. 1:19; Rev. 2:28). The careful distancing of the Melchizedekian priesthood from the Levitical system, along with showing the new priest was messianic, was meant to be a warning to those in the beleaguered Jewish church to not turn back to Judaism and to not mix Old Testament priestly ritual with their Christianity. Perfection—access to God—comes only through Christ.

*Bruce:* It is a matter of common knowledge that our Lord belonged to the tribe of Judah. This, it may be remarked, could be a matter of common knowledge only if it was generally accepted that He was born of the royal line of David. But whatever hopes and promises were attached in the Pentateuch to the tribe of Judah, priestly service found no place among them. No member of the tribe of Judah was appointed to officiate at the altar.

*MacArthur:* Jesus did not come from Levi, which was the only priestly tribe. He was from Judah, which, just as all the other non-Levitical tribes, had nothing to do with priestly service at the altar. If Jesus became a high priest, therefore, He obviously was of a different order of priesthood from the Aaronic-Levitical. And His priestly qualifications obviously were not hereditary. The hereditary Levitical priesthood—typical, temporary, and imperfect—was changed and replaced by Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood, which was real, eternal, and perfect.

*Phillips:* The third point is that since Jesus Christ is not a member of the tribe of Levi (the only tribe authorized for priestly office in the old covenant), but is rather a member of the tribe of Judah, the coming of His priesthood constitutes a new order of priests altogether. The priesthood revealed and established by the coming of Christ is therefore different from that established under Moses. There has been a change of priesthood in Christ.

## B. The Superiority of the Melchizedekian Priesthood (Hebrews 7:15-19)

### 1. A New Priesthood (7:15-17)

*Hughes:* The focus naturally changes from the insufficiency of Aaron to the sufficiency of Melchizedek with the assertion that He is superior because of His unique nature—namely, His ‘indestructible life’ (v. 16).

#### a) Legal Observation (7:15)

<sup>15</sup>*This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek...*

*Schreiner:* The words ‘and this becomes clearer’ introduce verse 15. What has become clearer? God has unmistakably communicated that a new priesthood has arrived, and thus the old Levitical priesthood is no longer applicable. The readers of the letter were not facing an ambiguous and complex situation where the will of God was difficult to discern, where they could legitimately claim that perhaps the Levitical system was the best option for them. The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood and the obsolescence of the Levitical priesthood are plain to see, for God has now fulfilled—as the resurrection of Jesus makes especially evident—His promise to bring in a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The word ‘arises’ (*ἀνίσταται, anistatai*) is likely polyvalent so that it refers not only to Jesus’ appearing on the scene as priest but also to His resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection vindicated His priesthood, and upon His resurrection His priesthood was established in all its fullness.

*MacArthur:* The Greek language has two words for ‘another’. *Allos* means another—that is, an additional one—of the same kind. The word used in verse 15, however, is *heteros*, which means another of a different kind. The first indicates a quantitative difference, the second a qualitative difference. In Christ, we do not have another high priest just like those who ministered in the Tabernacle and the Temple. He is *heteros*, or a completely different kind and order. Under the Old Covenant there were many priests, and they were all *allos*. Under the New there is but one Priest, and He is *heteros*.

*MacArthur:* Both verses 11 and 15 speak of another priest arising. But in verse 15, ‘arises’ (*anistēmi*) is in the Greek middle voice, which is reflexive. The phrase, then, could be translated, ‘another priest arises by Himself.’ This meaning has special significance in several ways. First, arising by Himself implies that this other Priest had no priestly ancestry, no priestly heritage. Aaronic priests could only claim a right to priesthood because of who their parents were. Jesus claimed the right because of who He Himself is. Second, Jesus’ arising by Himself indicates His resurrection. In Acts 2:32, Luke uses *anistēmi* specifically to refer to Jesus’ resurrection.

#### b) Legal Requirement (7:16)

##### (1) Bodily Descent (7:16a)

...<sup>16</sup>*who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent...*

*Schreiner:* The author continues to explain in v. 16 why Jesus’ priesthood is superior and permanent, whereas the Levitical arrangement is inferior and temporary. Levitical priests served on the basis of a ‘fleshly commandment’ (*ἐντολῆς σαρκίνης, entolēs sarkinēs*). No intrinsic virtue qualified one to be a Levitical priest. All one needed was the right family tree, the appropriate genealogical roots.

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*Hughes:* the qualifications for the Levitical priesthood were patently *external*. A priestly candidate had to be: 1) legitimate; 2) a Levite (meaning that his mother had to be an Israelite and his father a priest before him); and 3) having no physical defects. There were 142 physical blemishes listed that could disqualify him, some of which are recorded in Leviticus 21:16-23. His ordination ceremony was painstakingly external regarding how he was to be bathed, clothed, anointed with oil, and marked with blood. After his ordination, he had to observe specified washings, anointings, and hair-cutting. The focus was external throughout.

*MacArthur:* The standard prescribed for priests in the old economy had to do only with the physical. A priest, of course, was supposed to be godly. A number of priests who were especially ungodly were severely punished by God. But godliness was not a qualification for their serving at the altar. First, they had to be pure descendants of Aaron. Even with this pedigree, however, any one of more than a hundred physical blemishes or deficiencies could disqualify them from officiating. But there was not a single moral or spiritual qualification that they had to meet. Their serving had nothing at all to do with character, ability, personality, or holiness.

*Phillips:* Why is the new law of the new priest—that is, the new administration of salvation brought by the coming of Christ—better than the old one? The difference has to do with the priest himself and with the authority by which he holds the priestly office, and therefore with the nature of his mission. The priesthood was an office of great honor and privilege under the old covenant. The priests alone labored in God’s temple and not in the fields or the army or the marketplace. They touched and handled the mysteries of God, serving as mediators who interacted with the Lord. What was it, then that made a Levite a priest instead of a Benjamite or a son of Reuben or Naphtali? What secured this great privilege for this one tribe? The regulation of the law and that alone. A priest didn’t have to have a sterling character or superlative accomplishments. It wasn’t his education his training, or his spiritual devotion. He got the job because the law said so. It was the law that made him a priest, and as a priest it was the law that he relied upon for his ministry.

*Phillips:* The nature of the Levite’s authority determined the kind of ministry he offered. He held his priesthood on the basis of the external code, and the external code is what his ministry offered. If you went to the Old Testament priest and asked how he intended to draw you near to God, he would speak of the commandments and the rituals of the ceremonial law.

### (2) Indestructible Life (7:16b)

*...but by the power of an indestructible life.*

*Hughes:* On the other hand, this new priest (Christ), like Melchizedek, has one grand qualification, which is not external but *internal*—‘the power of an indestructible life.’ This does not mean that He never died. It means that our priest died a death that could not hold Him—a death that was followed by resurrection! Therefore, to say that Jesus is high priest on the basis of ‘an indestructible life’ is to say that He is high priest on the basis of the Resurrection. Thus, the Resurrection not only declared Jesus to be the Son (Rom. 1:4), but it also marks the inauguration of Christ as our high priest. Jesus is our great high priest because of the quality of His life. He is eternal: the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and ending, the first and the last. But there is more to the quality of His priesthood than its eternity—it is *experientially* and *morally, internally* perfect—and because of that He is a perfect priest. What this means to us can scarcely be put into words.

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*Schreiner:* Jesus' priesthood, however, was of a radically different nature. He didn't qualify as priest by virtue of His genealogy. Indeed, He failed the genealogical test, for He was clearly not from the tribe of Levi (vv. 13-14). Jesus didn't merely meet an external legal requirement. The criteria were much higher for Him, for He became a priest because of 'the power of an indestructible life.' The word 'indestructible' (*ἀκατάλυτον, akatalutou*) refers to a life that cannot be brought to an end. Jesus, of course, died, and hence the reference is likely to His resurrection, to His victory over death. So His resurrection and exaltation are in view. All Levitical priests die, but Jesus is a priest who has triumphed over death forever. His life will never be brought to an end. Surely such a priesthood is superior to one where death leads to an endless succession of priests.

*MacArthur:* Like Melchizedek's priesthood, however, Jesus' was first and last based on who He was. It had nothing to do with the physical body, but everything to do with eternal power, 'the power of an indestructible life.' In the case of the Levitical priesthood, no matter how ill-suited a man may have been, or how reluctant to take the office, the law made him a priest because of the family into which he was born and because of certain physical requirements he had to meet. It was outward compulsion. For Jesus Christ, priesthood is an inner compulsion, because of who He is. He became, and He continues, a priest by eternal power—a power that can do what no priest could ever do: give us access to God.

*Phillips:* How much better, then, is the priesthood of Christ. Jesus rests His priesthood on a different basis: His own indestructible life, which is the power He therefore has for His ministry as high priest in the order of Melchizedek. When you ask Jesus what He offers to draw you near to God, He answers with His shed blood that fulfilled the law and with His offer of spiritual rebirth unto eternal life. This was the contrast Jesus Himself proclaimed during His earthly ministry (Jn. 7:37-38). This is the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant in Christ. The old covenant administered salvation through the outward commandment; the new administers salvation through the transforming power of life (cp. Jn. 10:10).

*Phillips:* The Messiah, represented prior to the law by the figure of Melchizedek, and identified under the law by David in Psalm 110, would establish a new and eternal priesthood. His priesthood is an eternal one, not merely or even essentially in terms of its unlimited duration, but in the character of its life. This priesthood rests upon and advances not merely the power of the outward commandment and ritual, but the inward power of eternal life—unquenchable life from heaven that is of God Himself and lasts forever. Jesus manifested the power of an unconquerable and indestructible life when He died for our sins and rose again from the grave. When Jesus died on the cross, He fulfilled the intent of the old priesthood, accomplishing the full atonement it anticipated, and therefore its order was set aside. Then, rising from the dead and ascending to the right hand of God the Father in heaven, he established a new and eternal priesthood that is able to accomplish all that the old priesthood could not. His heavenly ministry in the power of eternal life, sends for that life by the Holy Spirit, to change us and draw us near to God.

### *c) Legal Declaration (7:17)*

<sup>17</sup>*For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."*

*Schreiner:* The author supports the claim that Jesus had an indestructible life, confirming it from Scripture itself. He cites Ps. 110:4, the only other place in the Scripture that names Melchizedek. The inclusion of this verse in Psalm 110 indicates that the Melchizedek priesthood was no

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anomaly. It was intended by God to last forever, as the prophetic word demonstrates. Furthermore, what the psalmist wrote applies to Jesus Christ. The author has already applied Ps. 110:1 to Jesus, and he regularly alludes to or quotes it in the letter (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). If we put Ps. 110:1 and Ps. 110:4 together, it is evident that Jesus is a king-priest. Here the author quotes Ps. 110:4 to support the claim that Jesus possesses an indestructible life. The key word from the OT citation is ‘forever.’ Death did not and could not conquer Him.

*Bruce:* A further token of the imperfection of the old priesthood and the superiority of the new lies on the face of our author’s Old Testament text, ‘You are a priest *forever*.’ These words are quite inapplicable to the old order; no priest of Aaron’s line could have been described as ‘a priest forever,’ for the simple reason that each one of them died in due course. But the Christian’s high priest is immortal; having died once for all and risen from the dead, he discharges His ministry on His people’s behalf in the power of a life which can never be destroyed (v. 16).

*Phillips:* In chapter 7, the author advances his main argument: the supremacy of Christ’s priesthood over the earlier priesthood of Aaron and the Levites. The centerpiece of this argument is the citation from Psalm 110:4: ‘The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”’ From Melchizedek, representing Jesus Christ some four thousand years ago, even the Old Testament priests received their blessing in Abraham. This is one way of showing the supremacy of the new covenant over the old. Our present passage advances that argument a step further, as the writer continues to explain the differences between the two administrations in vv. 18-19.

### 2. A Better Hope (7:18-19)

#### a) *Weakness of the Levitical Priesthood (7:18-19a)*

<sup>18</sup>For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness <sup>19</sup>(for the law made nothing perfect)...

*Schreiner:* The contrast between the Levitical and Melchizedekian priesthood continues in verses 18-19. The ‘previous command’ here refers not to any particular command in the Mosaic law, but the previous administration, the Levitical order that was in force during the old covenant. So what has been ‘set aside’ or ‘annulled’ (*ἀθετήσις*, *athetēsis*) is the Levitical priesthood. The term is legal, designating the ‘abrogation’ of a previous requirement. The reason given for the setting aside of the Levitical priesthood centers on its deficiencies. It is faulted for being ‘weak and unprofitable,’ i.e., ‘weak and ineffectual.’ The weakness, given the flow of the argument, relates to its inability to give human beings hope. The Levitical priesthood doesn’t bring people near to God with confidence and boldness.

*MacArthur:* Here in verses 18-19 is the climax of the text. Aaron is replaced by Christ. God has set aside the old and imperfect and has replaced it with the new and perfect. ‘Setting aside’ (*athetēsis*) pertains to doing away with something that has been established. It is used, for example, of annulling a treaty, a promise, a law, a regulation, or of removing a man’s name from a document. The whole paraphernalia of the sacrificial system, the whole ceremonial system, was canceled, annulled, done away with entirely. God assured its end in 70 AD, when He allowed the Temple to be destroyed.

*Bruce:* The declaration, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek,’ thus announces the abrogation of the earlier law, which instituted the Aaronic order. It was inevitable

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that the earlier law should be abrogated sooner or later; for all the impressive solemnity of the sacrificial ritual and the sacerdotal ministry, no real peace of conscience was procured thereby, no immediate access to God. That is not to say that faithful men and women in Old Testament times did not enjoy peace of conscience and a sense of nearness to God; the Psalter provides evidence enough that that did (cp. Ps. 32:1ff.; Ps. 73:28). But these experiences had nothing to do with the Levitical ritual or the Aaronic priesthood.

*Phillips:* Verses 18-19 say something negative about the old administration and something positive about the new one. This is not to say that the old covenant was wrong. In the flow of God's redemptive history, it was necessary and good. The negative point that the writer of Hebrews makes is simply that as an administration of salvation, the law could not bring about what it sought. The goal of every priesthood is to draw the people to God, but the old covenant could not do this. This was its weakness, and why it demanded another covenant to come. The same is true today. An outward code, a system of rules, may point us in the right direction (and the moral law of God certainly does that). However, it offers no power, no change of heart, to motivate us along that change of course, and no impetus to move along the new azimuth. For this we need power, a new disposition or attitude, which the law cannot convey, but which comes only by the Holy Spirit as He is poured out on us by our heavenly high priest.

*Schreiner:* The weakness of the Levitical priesthood is elaborated upon in v. 19a, 'for the law perfected nothing.' The use of the word 'perfected' (*ἐτελείωσεν, eteleiōsen*) functions as an inclusion with the word 'perfection' (*τελείωσις, teleiōsis*) in 7:11. In 7:11 the inability of the Levitical priesthood to bring perfection is asserted, but here he says that the 'law' cannot bring perfection. The priesthood and law are tied together in any case since the author indicated in 7:11 that the law is based on the priesthood. We have a package deal here; what is true of the law is also true of the priesthood and vice versa. In asserting that the law perfected nothing, he means (cp. 7:11 above) that the eschatological perfection could not be achieved via the law. The law did not accomplish final and full forgiveness of sins and cleanse their consciences. The institutions of priesthood, sacrifice, and atonement were not able to achieve a definitive arrangement of the relationship to God. Nor were human beings transformed via the law. Nor was human rule over the world restored via the law.

### *b) Hope in the New Priesthood (7:19b)*

*...but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.*

*Schreiner:* Given its liabilities, the Levitical priesthood was annulled, and a better and new hope has been introduced. The word 'better' (*κρείττονος, kreittonos*) captures the authors attention: Jesus is 'better' than angels (1:4); the readers have experienced 'better things' (6:9); Melchizedek is 'better' than Abraham (7:7); Jesus guarantees a 'better covenant' (7:22; 8:6), which has 'better promises' (8:6); He offered 'better sacrifices' (9:23); the readers have a 'better possession' (10:34); a 'better country' (11:16); await a 'better resurrection' (11:35); OT saints will experience what is 'better' and 'perfect' only in fellowship with NT saints (11:40); Jesus' blood speaks 'better' than Abel's (12:24). It is inconceivable, according to the author, that the readers would forsake what is better and cling to the law and the Levitical priesthood.

*Bruce:* The whole apparatus of worship associated with that ritual and priesthood was calculated rather to keep people at a distance from God than to bring them near. But the 'hope set before us' in the gospel is better because it accomplishes this very thing which was impossible under the old ceremonial; it enables Christians to 'draw near to God.' How it enables them to do so is

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explained in greater detail later on (cp. 10:19-22), but the fact that the gospel, unlike the law, has opened up a way of free access to God is our author's ground for claiming that the gospel has achieved that perfection which the law could never bring about.

*Hughes:* Today, *perfection*—access—is ours through Jesus Christ. The veil has been sundered, inviting us to the Holy of Holies.

*MacArthur:* The old system could reveal sin. It could even cover sin, in a certain way and to a certain temporary degree. But it could never remove sin, and so itself had to be removed. It brought nothing to conclusion. It gave no security; it gave no peace. A man never had a clear conscience. But the priesthood of Jesus Christ made all of what Israel looked forward to a reality. It brought access to God.

*Phillips:* What is the difference between the old covenant and the new? The old covenant worked externally by the law, and therefore was unable to empower the people to uphold their end of the relationship; under the administration of the new covenant comes the miracle of regeneration—new hearts to make a new people eager to do God's will. This was never offered under the old covenant, which explains its weakness, its uselessness for actually working salvation. However, because of the inward work of the Holy Spirit, Christ's ministry offers 'a better hope...through which we draw near to God.' The better hope of the new covenant in Christ is spoken of by the author of Hebrews as 'drawing near to God.' This is our freedom as Christians—not to presume upon God's grace through loose living or by flirting with sin, but the freedom to draw near to God by His Spirit. It is the freedom to fellowship with God Himself, which was always the goal of the priesthood, but is accomplished only by the heavenly ministry of our great high priest, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. This is a much better way, a much better hope, than any Old Testament saint every knew.

*Schreiner:* The 'better hope' picks up on the theme of hope in 6:18-20. What is introduced is a *better* hope, which refers not to the quality of hope (in the sense that God has made us more hopeful), but the thing hoped for, its content or ground. It is better because of its effectiveness. In 6:18-20 the author encourages the readers with the promise of God, with the oath that He swore to them as the offspring of Abraham. They have a hope that is an anchor, for through Jesus they have access to God. The author makes a similar point here. The hope is better because through it believers 'draw near to God.' Jesus' sacrifice, as will be explained in more detail as the letter progresses, cleanses believers from sin so they can boldly enter God's presence. The Levitical priesthood did not bring people near to God. Instead, it reminded people that they were distant from Him, that their sins were not atoned for fully and finally.

### c) *Accessing Our Better Hope*

*Phillips:* Since our high priest is exalted in heaven with power to transform us, the Christian life is not a matter of outward performance, but of drawing near to God by the Holy Spirit. Jesus has opened the way for us, so that we no longer related to God through an external code, but in a living relationship through faith in Jesus Christ. By the Spirit we also are able to fulfill the righteousness represented in the law, since by the Spirit we have both the power and the desire to keep it (see Rom. 8:2-4). It was for this that Christ came. Whereas the law 'made nothing perfect,' through the life Christ gives 'a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.' This is Christ's goal and desire, the end of His labor—not only to see us justified and forgiven of our sins, but actually led into relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, who gives us power to stop being lawbreakers and instead be law-keepers through faith in Christ.

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*Phillips:* This leads to very practical questions: Do you live in fellowship with God? Through God's Spirit do you know and relate to Him? Do you talk with God in prayer? Does His voice speak to your mind and your heart as you received His Word in the Scriptures? Are you living in new obedience by His power, with evidence of His fruit growing in your life? This is the true Christian life, and everything short of it is a counterfeit. The Christian life is a life in the Spirit of God, obeying and drawing near to God in spirit and truth.

*Phillips:* How then do you get the Spirit? You get the Spirit not by seeking after supposedly spiritual experiences, but by fixing your eyes on Jesus Christ and turning to Him in faith, who died for the forgiveness of your sins, fulfilling the priesthood of Aaron, and who now lives forever as the eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek, to grant you eternal life. What we most need is something the external code can never impart and we ourselves cannot produce by any fleshly means, yet Jesus gives it to all who come to God through faith in Him; a new heart, a new attitude, a new power for godliness and newness of life for the glory of God, all which comes through faith in Christ as He is offered in the gospel, as Christ responds to our faith with the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

For next time: Read Hebrews 7:20-28.